

From the Archives

Patton's Apology

During the last days of the campaign in Sicily in 1943, General George S. Patton, Jr., slapped a hospitalized soldier. The incident drew national attention and to some extent overshadowed Patton's fine leadership. General Eisenhower reprimanded General Patton and ordered him to apologize to the 7th Army troops.

The slapping incident and General Patton's apology constitute a major scene in the movie *Patton*. The movie depicts a contrite senior general choking out an apology to a large formation of troops seemingly eager to see him humiliated. A quite different view of the incident has been described by General Ted Conway, then a major with the 60th Infantry Regiment of the 9th Division:

We were assembled in a large . . . olive orchard. . . . General Patton arrived in that famous command car of his with the two metal flags on either side . . . a long trailing cloud of dust, and MPs and so on. We all stood at attention and put on our helmets and the bugler sounded attention and General Patton mounted this sort of PT platform in front of these 3,000 . . . troops. . . . General Patton had a rather high, squeaky voice, and as he started to address the regiment he said, "Take seats," so we sat down on our helmets—it was a practice of those days, to keep us out of the mud or the dust . . . , and General Patton started to give us what we knew was to be his apology. But he never got past his first word, which was "Men!" and at that point the whole regiment erupted. It sounded like a football game—a touchdown had been scored because the helmets (steel pots) started flying through the air, coming down all over—raining steel helmets and the men just shouted "Georgie, Georgie,"—a name which he detested. He was saying, we think he was saying—"at ease, take seats," and so on. Then he had the bugler sound "attention" again, but nothing happened. Just all these cheers. So, finally General Patton was standing there and he was shaking his head and you could see big tears streaming down his face and he said, or words to this effect, "The hell with it," and he walked off the platform. At this point the bugler sounded "attention" and . . . everybody grabbed the nearest available steel helmet, put it on, being sure to button the chin strap (which was a favorite Patton quirk) and as he stepped into his command car and again went down the side of the regiment, dust swirling, everybody stood at attention and saluted to the right and General Patton stood up in his command car and saluted, crying. . . . He was our hero. We were on his side. We knew the problem. We knew what he had done and why he had done it.

Source: Richard J. Sommers, ed., *Vignettes of Military History, Volume III* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army Military History Institute, February 1982), Vignette No. 149, contributed by Dr. William Snyder, drawn from Oral History Interview with General Theodore S. Conway, US Army Military History Institute.